

Asia-Pacific Geopolitics: Implications on Human Rights*

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First of all, I'd like to start with a confession. I could have been one of you doctors and medical students were I not drawn to student political activism during my college days at the height of martial rule. I was a pre-medical student in the University of the Philippines when I lost all sense of having to memorize the names of body parts, and drawn to the study of politics and society.

Sometimes, though, I wish I had the more practical and technical skills of a doctor. Ultimately, I believe the doctor is a more important person in the community. Nowhere can we see that today than in East Timor where people are in urgent need of life-saving assistance. The Nobel Peace Prize that went this year to the Medisin Sans Frontier is also a long deserved recognition of the kind of service doctors in particular can give to the world, especially in conflict areas.

Happily, I see today the crossing of paths between medicine and the social sciences as exemplified in your theme on Medicine and Human Rights and the nature of the sponsoring organization, physicians for the prevention of nuclear war. This is a good sign because it shows that the world must indeed be viewed as a whole rather than as body parts that can be disjointed, diagnosed and treated independently of the rest.

So what I will contribute today is a diagnosis of the geopolitics side, which is of course only one dimension of our multi-dimensional patient — the world.

Like all good doctors administering to a sick patient, I will start with the good news.

The good news: With the exception of the North Korean case, Asia-Pacific geopolitics is no longer defined by the Cold War divisions which fed many of the civil and inter-state wars in the past. The end of the

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Cold War, for one, allowed for avenues for peaceful settlement, and nullified one major justification for continuing armamentation, including nuclear arms buildup. The post-Cold War period thus saw the peaceful end to long standing conflicts and paved the way for new elected governments. This was the case in South Africa, Nicaragua, Cambodia, to name a few of the most troubled spots in the past.

Erstwhile enemies are now friends. Today, you will find American businesses among the prime investors in Vietnam and China. Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Cambodia — previously considered main threats to regional security — are now brand new members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Russia and the United States enjoy good diplomatic relations. New regional economic-political networks such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC) and the other regional groups in South and Southeast Asia, are likewise gaining long-term importance.

One of the implications of these developments is that world politics is no longer couched in terms of the misleading dichotomy between “democracy and communism” (misleading because a good number of non-communist countries were/are no doubt authoritarian states). Bilateral and multilateral ties now cut across this divide, giving way to more diverse interactions among peoples and cultures.

Increasingly, human rights have become one major instrument for defining international relations in a region. Dr. Mahb ul Haq, a special adviser to the UNDP, lists several factors that have supported the foundation of an international human rights regime. Here I elaborate on these factors.

- *Communication Technology.* Human rights violations cannot totally be hidden because of the television camera, or even just the handycam. The 1988 Tiananmen massacre and the shooting of demonstrators in Thailand in the May 1992 uprising were brought to the homes and hotel rooms worldwide via television. Anwar Ibrahim’s black-eye caught by a camera and beamed around the globe painted a thousand words about Prime Minister Mahathir’s government in Malaysia.

- *Democracy movements.* Democratic transitions beginning in the 1980s (e.g., in the Philippines, Korea, Taiwan) have highlighted the cause of democracy and drew inspiration from one another.
- *Shared notion of humanity.* As the world became smaller figuratively and people across cultures interacted, the notion of a shared humanity and the responsibility of the international community to their fellow humans and the environment have gained more and more currency.
- *Evolving new paradigms.* The elaboration of new development models that are civil society- or people-centered, are pluralist in orientation, provide a gender perspective, and emphasize sustainable development and the notion of primary stakeholders are providing alternative strategies and values systems that conform with human rights principles.

Now, let's get to the bad news.

First, it is here in Asia, through certain Asian leaders, that we find the most articulate opposition against the universal application of human rights. It is alarming how the extreme defenders of cultural relativism or of the sequentiality of human rights (those who believe democracy can be temporarily, if not permanently, sacrificed for economic development) have used arguments of culture and the need for economic development to justify their repressive governments and economic policies that deny proper wages and housing for the poor. True, there are differences across cultures and even generations and gender. But who will deny the right to life, liberty, freedom of speech and belief that must be enjoyed by everyone, rich or poor, Asian or Westerner. While cultural practices vary, indeed, there are grounds to build a common base of human rights principles and practices.

The manipulative use of the principle of non-interference/sovereignty has become the biggest stumbling block to building a human rights regime, particularly in countries where respect for human rights is a scarce commodity. Yet we do not hear from these governments the same resistance to economic penetration that has effectively eroded their much vaunted sovereignty. What we have as a result is a host of authoritarian regimes who welcome globalization and open up their markets and financial systems to the international market and capital,

and yet barricade their corrupt and murderous regimes from external and internal scrutiny.

The second bad news is that, in effect, despite the post-Cold War focus on human rights, HR comes second only to the demands of the global economy (run by finance capital) and economic pragmatism on the part of recipient states.

Thus, while the US has put a premium on human rights conditionalities in its foreign policy, the US government is itself holding back the institutionalization of a global human rights regime. Recently, the US Senate rejected the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that will ban nuclear weapons testing. The US also has not signed the treaty banning the production, export and transfer of anti-personnel mines which remains widely used in many poor countries at war, inflicting horrendous damage to humans.

The US government's history of support for Latin America's and Asia's dictators in the past decades has checkered its human rights record and put doubts on its credibility as human rights enforcer. The US and western partners at times overdo their "police" role. For instance, NATO's large-scale military offensive in Kosovo was a massive surgical operation that required too much bloodletting. Similar to the Gulf War in the early 1990s, it was done at great expense to human lives and local communities, and yet failed in its prime mission of overthrowing the regime.

International support given to a number of Asia's past and present dictators shows that the conflict between the protagonists of the human rights debate is not irreconcilable. In many instances, shared interests in big business including military-industrial complexes, have overshadowed human rights concerns. Indonesia's Suharto and the military leaders of Thailand were in full agreement with the economic restructuring demanded by providers of foreign assistance and investments. Trouble arose only when these Asian leaders became too hot to handle because of profligate corruption and cronyism that ultimately caused insecurity to finance capital.

Because of the selective application of the human rights agenda by the West, their credential as human rights advocates weakens and

the insistence on non-interference gains weight among the populace, even if such intervention were/are warranted, such as in East Timor and Burma.

The sum total of all these developments is that there is as yet no peace in the Asia-Pacific, a region where one finds all kinds of conflicts — anti-colonial (East Timor), military coup (Pakistan), military rule (Burma), border/territorial wars (between India and Pakistan re Kashmir), spurious annexations (Tibet), inter-ethnic strife (Muslim Mindanao, the various regional groups in Burma), etc. Some Asian countries are the most heavily mined in the world — e.g., Cambodia, Afghanistan. Nuclear arms buildup continue (North Korea, Iran, Pakistan and India) as do nuclear testing in the Pacific islands. The sale and transfer of small firearms are brisk. Poor countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh are buying up more military hardware. Democracy, corruption, independence, poverty: the old Third World issues are still very much present in Asia. This, despite the fact that some Asian countries — Japan, Korea, other NICs like Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia — are also among the world's economic achievers.

In today's multi-polar world, one can say that Asia-Pacific's geopolitics has lost its center. Conflicts have diffused and multiplied:

- The alignment among friends and enemies are in a state of flux. Take the case of China. At one point the US and Europe are condemning it, in the next minute, President Jiang Zemin is shaking hands with US President Clinton and England's Queen Elizabeth.

- Multiple poles of leadership are on the rise, but the cards are spread out with no one really holding the ace. Japan is an economic giant but is not much as a political or military power. Australia and New Zealand are the early developed economies in the region but they are too down under to be strategically significant. They also have to firm up their identity as part of Asia. China and India for their sheer mass as an economic market and military force are potential regional powers but they are still burdened with developing their respective economies.

- From Kashmir to the Spratlys to North Korea, the actual and potential hot spots involving more than one country are dispersed in the region, and their nature and the parties involved are disparate.

What do all these mean for human rights and for doctors concerned with human rights?

For sure, the demand for humanitarian missions that will respond to the situation on the ground will continue. Doctors will always be called upon to respond to these needs. Call it a career option, if you will, but there is definitely this option for you medical students and practising doctors. You don't even have to go outside of your own country. In all First World or North countries, there are pockets of Third World or South communities. In the South or in the so-called Third World countries, there are countless needs that I'm sure you are very well aware of.

Non-partisanship in the provision of medical service is supposed to be part of medical ethics founded on the right of everyone to medical attention. This non-partisanship or neutrality principle has assured the International Red Cross of access to remote and war-torn areas and allows for special protection to all medical personal based on International Humanitarian Law.

But non-partisanship in extending medical assistance does not mean non-partisanship in the broader human rights cause. The political, economic and social dimensions of poverty and war cannot but make the protection and provision of human rights a political act. Activism in order to eradicate poverty, put a stop to the continuing arms race, build a regional governance founded on life-nurturing values, fight injustice in all forms should therefore be part of the medical students and practitioners' call to duty.

Let this crossing of paths of medicine and the social sciences, therefore, be a continuing project, a refashioning once more of an integrated body of knowledge that we have cut up into pieces of specializations, a rebuilding of a world order where body and mind, individual and community, the whole ecology, are in harmony. ❀