Abstract

Returning from China, Marco Polo spoke of a country and a continent of enormous riches, impressive knowledge and hugely advanced administrative skills. In Europe his superlative references were seen as implausible. Nonetheless they reflected the true comparative dimension of Asia.

Contemporary Asia still imposes a feeling of overwhelming weight, which is bound to increase substantially over the next decades.

Asia is home to about 60% of mankind, which means that its population alone largely outnumbers the population of the rest of the World. Between 1950 and 1995 Asia’s population grew by roughly 2 billion people.

The sheer dimension of Asia, both geographical and demographic, is a factor that will unavoidably influence the world of the 21st century.

Ancient commercial links, such as the Silk, Incense and Spices (both land and maritime) routes, as well as past expansion movements such as the Muslim ones, paved the way for economic, cultural, sociological and religious exchanges whose outcome still influences contemporary Asian realities, from the geopolitics of Central Asia to the India-Pakistan rift, the Indonesian internal tensions and Southeast Asian terrorism.

Asia encompasses most of the fastest-growing economies in the world. In ppp terms China is already the second biggest economy in the world and it will plausibly become the biggest one within the next decades.

East Asian economies literally tend to conquer Western markets in a growing range of manufactured goods but also in high-tech and sophisticated services such as software, thus inducing not only a flow of business from the West into Asia but also a net migration of jobs in the same direction. China and India are clearly the front-runners in this new
Pattem. As a consequence of more developed economies, personal income, in most Asia in general but especially in its Eastern regions, is rapidly increasing and the whole area is emerging in the world economy not only as a major producer but also as an important global consumer.

Understanding the present dynamics and patterns of the Asian economies, as well as their consumption needs, allows us to explain why this continent will growingly pose an overwhelming pressure on the world resources, namely on what concerns energy, food and water, simultaneously raising strong challenges to international environmental management and conservation.

International security is highly sensitive to the underlying realities in Asia. The extensive instabilities in the Middle East, the dependency on Persian Gulf oil reserves, Islamic radicalism, Al-Qaeda and global and regional terrorism with a fundamental epicentre in Asia are examples of this continent's centrality in present international security.

Nuclear proliferation has also been centred in Asia and all present new nuclear powers belong to the Asian continent. India and Pakistan possess nuclear capabilities and raise the haunting spectre of possible nuclear confrontation. North Korea is already nuclear-capable and Iran’s program is a new focus of uncertainty and tensions.

Separatisms and terrorism in Indonesia as well as in the Philippines, Malaysia and other countries are examples of intra-national instabilities and of cross-region dramas and risks, in an area that is strategically crucial to the world.

Conflicts and tensions are widespread across Asia, from the well-known Middle East problems to the less-known Central Asian fractures to the Tibet question, the Naga people in Northeast India, the Kashmir issue, the Maoist guerrilla in Nepal, the ethnic conflicts in Indonesia, the South China Sea potentially explosive tension or the Tamil actions in Sri Lanka.

At the same time, analysing Asian-style politics and foreseeing what Asia’s global political role will likely become in the next decades demands our ability to intelligently understand the deeply rooted feelings, values and cultural references that moulded Asian generations for many centuries, including what many choose to call “Asian Values”.

In sum, studying Asia is an intellectual, political and academic challenge that is relevant per se. But understanding past and contemporary Asia is also fundamental either to interpret much of today’s international dynamics in politics, security and economics, or to forecast what the new international realities will look like in the next years and decades.