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1
Ethnic Separatism: an Introduction

Robert G. Wirsing

The modern system of sovereign states that was ushered in by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 has had as one of its central tenets the territorial integrity of states. There is irony in the fact, therefore, that another of its central tenets, acquired in more recent centuries, has attached equal importance to the requirement of correspondence between the territorial state and the nation. Since the nation has typically been understood in terms of a people's cultural or ethnic (most often including linguistic) identity, a feature of human society stubbornly defiant both of unambiguous definition and of distinct boundaries, determining the right match between the state and the ethnically defined nation has proven to be one of the most stubbornly perplexing and perilous conundrums of the modern era. The difficulty in gaining widespread assent to any particular match has meant endless challenges to the legitimacy of existing nation-state boundaries. It has also meant the nearly continuous obsolescing of world maps.

In some of the contemporary world's politically more turbulent regions, the heads of only weakly legitimized multicultural states are likely to take seriously this matter of routine cartographic obsolescence. This is even more certain to be the rule when the obsolescence has the appearance of strategic premeditation.

A retired US army lieutenant colonel by the name of Ralph Peters learned the importance of this rule in mid-2006 with publication in the *Armed Forces Journal* of his brief but unusually provocative article 'Blood Borders: How a Better Middle East Would Look'.[1] A well-known and prolific essayist and commentator on military affairs, Peters was posted at the time of his retirement in 1998 to the Pentagon's Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence. So it should perhaps not have come as a surprise to him to find that his polemic attracted more than usual attention around the world. What he wrote in the article was that the European-designed international borders of the Middle East (by his definition inclusive of Afghanistan and Pakistan) were 'arbitrary', 'distorted', and 'dysfunctional', and that without major revisions in these boundaries 'we shall never see a more peaceful

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Middle East'. The borders of the Middle East, he claimed, had to be changed 'to reflect the natural ties of blood and faith'. A 'dirty little secret from 5,000 years of history', he added, was that 'ethnic cleansing works'.

Much more attention-grabbing than the essay itself, however, were the two maps that accompanied it – the one labelled 'before' and showing the international boundaries of the Middle Eastern region as they now stand, the other labelled 'after' showing Peters' massive redrawing of the region's international boundaries to correct what the author judged to be the injustices inflicted on such 'cheated' minorities as the Kurds, Baloch, and Arab Shia. Of the sixteen or so countries included on Peters' map, a dozen or so were designated losers. A few of these, like Afghanistan, were labelled both winners and losers. A number of them, however, including Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Pakistan, were classed entirely as losers – indeed, as big losers. No wonder, then, that the article got a less than friendly welcome! No wonder either that in some quarters the Pentagon was seen by many to be the essay's real, albeit concealed, author.[2]

Now had Peters been minded to apply his transparently arbitrary, not to say harebrained, formula for cartographic relief, instead of to the Middle East, to the countries of South, South East, and East Asia (to that part of the world, in other words, we are going to designate as 'Asia' in this book), it is certain there would have been plenty of candidates for impromptu international boundary realignment in those places too. Naturally, any such boundary changes would result in plenty of resentment stirred up among those states stripped of territory. The identities of the winners and losers in these coming territorial exchanges obviously cannot be forecast precisely. That boundary changes will take place, however, seems certain. Indeed, judging from the enormous number of actual historical alterations to the world map witnessed repeatedly in the last century or so, the chances seem fairly slender that the international boundaries of the Asian landmass are somehow going to escape substantial realignment in the decades ahead. Not to at least consider this possibility would be foolhardy.

Obviously, whatever changes are made to the map of Asia in the coming years they are unlikely to be crafted by some clandestine cartographer located somewhere in the hidden depths of the Pentagon. Neither are they likely to be the product of a single cause, such as territorial exchanges resulting from victory or defeat in warfare. There have been too many different reasons for international boundary change in the last twenty years alone for us to be swayed by any such notion.

Nevertheless, if history is any guide, ethnic separatism is very likely to be a factor among the possible reasons for whatever boundary changes do occur in Asia. This possibility is, in any event, one of the strongest motivations behind the preparation of this book.

An even stronger motivation for this book's preparation, however, is the certainty that organized movements of ethnic separatism – even when

too badly led or too weak in motivation, numbers, and resources to win full territorial independence and thus ensure a change in the map – are going to retain enormous importance in the political lives of Asian states far into the future. Without doubt, they are going to impact in major ways on the political stability of these states, on their socio-economic development, on their prospects for democracy, and – not least – on the fates of their ethnic and religious minorities.

Ethnic separatism's potency in world politics – the extent of its future impact, whether specifically on the shape of the world map or, more generally, on the condition of interethnic relations – has been the focus over the past several decades of a fair amount of enterprising and animated scholarly debate. One side in this debate, which we shall label 'realist-pessimist', characteristically has taken the view that ethnic conflict is a constant and that violent efforts to break up existing multiethnic states are virtually inescapable. The other side, which we can call 'liberal-optimist', has generally taken the contrasting position that ethnic hatreds are constructed, often by manipulative elites, that contemporary governments of multiethnic states have learned important lessons from the admittedly dismal histories of their twentieth-century multiethnic predecessors, and that they are not bound to repeat the mistakes of the past. Both sides possess compelling arguments. Both sides are represented among the authors contributing to this book. In the chapters that follow, almost all of them ponder the extent to which the governments in the countries under review appear able or willing to avoid mistaken past practices. It is therefore incumbent upon us, as we begin assessing specific cases of ethnic separatism in Asia, to be aware of the broad dimensions of this important debate.

How enduring is ethnic nationalism?

Standing out as the most provocative and robust recent expression of the realist-pessimist school of thought on this issue was the spring 2008 article 'Us and Them: the Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism' in *Foreign Affairs*.[3] Its author, Jerry Z. Muller, a history professor at the Catholic University of America, argued forcefully that 'the creation of a peaceful regional order of nation-states has usually been the product of a violent process of ethnic separation. In areas where that separation has not yet occurred, politics is apt to remain ugly.' Innocent enough at first glance, his argument quickly became alarming.

Its alarming content arises from the fact that Muller in effect turned the familiar (and comforting) historical narrative of modern Europe on its head. According to him, this narrative, as generally understood, holds that Europeans, having experienced utter catastrophe in the two world wars of the twentieth century, 'concluded that nationalism was a danger and gradually abandoned it'. They dedicated themselves in the decades following

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these wars to the building of a transnational – and nationalist ideology transcending – regional order that flourished and continues to expand eastward. The postnational framework they built, or so the narrative asserts, stands as a model for the rest of the world. It is supposedly within anyone's reach. Accordingly, it is this framework that the non-Western world, including Asia, must adopt as its own objective and strive to reproduce. Seen from this perspective, 'nationalism', as Muller explained, 'had been a tragic detour on the road to a peaceful liberal democratic order'. There was no compelling reason, or so it was argued, for the rest of the world to make the same detour.

Muller's own reading of Europe's twentieth-century experience yields an utterly different interpretation. World War One, he observed, gave a green light to the ethnonationalist project by bringing about the large-scale disaggregation into their national components of the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires. With the vanquishing of these historical relics came a postwar settlement reached for the most part 'by moving borders to align them with populations'. Those profoundly upending changes were soon followed by the even more destabilizing and boundary-shaking developments of World War Two. Led by the Nazi regime's brutally forceful reordering of the European continent's ethnic map, a process in which the massive killing of Jews was the most conspicuous but not the only element, these developments, Muller stated, accelerated the process of ethnonational disaggregation.

Moreover, Muller argued, while the decades following World War Two were of course appropriately labelled postwar, they were far from postnational. The postwar settlement witnessed, in fact, further major unfolding of the ethnonationalist project. In contrast with that of World War One, the settlement was achieved mainly not by moving borders but by moving populations: 'Millions of people [mainly ethnic Germans, but also including Poles, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Serbs and Croats] were expelled from their homes and countries, with at least the tacit support of the victorious Allies.' Huge numbers of them perished. 'As a result of the massive process of ethnic unmixing', wrote Muller, 'the ethnonationalist ideal was largely realized: for the most part, each nation in Europe had its own state, and each state was made up almost exclusively of a single ethnic nationality.'

Seen in this light, the postnational model of transnational regionalism proudly held aloft by Europeans for duplication elsewhere in the world loses most of its authenticity along with much of its appeal. The ideal of the European Community appears to have been made possible not by the retreat of nationalism but by its triumph resulting from unparalleled nationalist carnage and unrestrained ethnic cleansing. Recalling Peters' proposed 'blood borders' cartographic exercise, it appears now that only in the most blinkered sense was he right: ethnic cleansing does indeed work. But its achievement historically, he failed to point out, had been at staggering cost in human suffering.

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The few remaining post-World War Two exceptions to Europe's de facto rule of monoethnic statehood (the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) soon followed behind the others. 'The breakup of Yugoslavia', which climaxed in 1992, was, according to Muller, 'simply the last act of a long play. But the plot of that play – the disaggregation of peoples and the triumph of ethnonationalism in modern Europe – is rarely recognized, and so a story whose significance is comparable to the spread of democracy or capitalism remains largely unknown and unappreciated.' The tendency of social scientists to overemphasize the 'imagined' and 'constructed' character of ethnic identity, Muller contended, has robbed the concept of ethnonationalism of its power. Yet, he concludes,

> it would be a mistake to think that because nationalism is partly constructed it is therefore fragile or infinitely malleable. Ethnonationalism was not a chance detour in European history: it corresponds to some enduring propensities of the human spirit that are heightened by the process of modern state creation, it is a crucial source of both solidarity and enmity, and in one form or another, it will remain for many generations to come. One can only profit from facing it directly.

Thus for Muller what Europe experienced in the twentieth century was the triumph of ethnonationalist ideology in general and of the 'separatist project' in particular. For his liberal-optimist critics, however, the lessons one should draw from that experience are of a very different sort.

Muller's critics didn't take long to strike back at him. In the July/August issue of *Foreign Affairs*, one set of authors, writing under the heading 'Better Institutions, Not Partition',[4] highlighted the fact that ethnic difference itself does not consistently lead to violence.[5] Drawing on the seminal work of James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin,[6] they argued to the contrary that interethnic conflict was a rarity. Fearon and Laitin, using ethnic demographic data for every country in Africa, had identified tens of thousands of pairs of ethnic groups with the potential for conflict. But, according to this group of Muller's critics,

> they did not find thousands of conflicts (as might have been expected if ethnic differences consistently led to violence) or hundreds of new states (which partition would have created). Strikingly, for every one thousand such pairs of ethnic groups, they found fewer than three incidents of violent conflict. Moreover, with few exceptions, African state boundaries today look just as they did in 1960. Fearon and Laitin concluded that communal violence, although horrifying, is extremely rare.

Based on their own research in Uganda, Weinstein and his colleagues maintained that barriers to interethnic cooperation were more often than

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not a product of that society's institutional deficiencies, in particular the lack of institutional opportunities for interethnic cooperation, not a result of any deeply rooted tribal antipathies. Their findings from experimental studies suggested 'that what might look from the outside like an intractable problem of discriminatory preferences may instead reflect [weak] norms of reciprocity that develop when individuals have few other institutions they can rely on to police the behavior of others'. Claiming that Muller was excessively partial to partition as a solution to chronic ethnic violence, they argued that

> it might be far more important [for a state] to invest in creating impartial and credible state institutions that facilitate cooperation across ethnic lines. With such institutions in place, citizens would no longer need to rely disproportionately on ethnic networks in the marketplace and in politics. In this respect, modernization may be the antidote to ethnic nationalism rather than its cause.

Responding to Muller's argument in the same issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Richard Rosecrance and Arthur Stein argued that Muller's perspective on ethnonationalism was essentially out of touch with reality. '[T]he nationalist prospect', they declared, 'was and remains hopelessly impractical.' Muller's narrative of European history, they said, ignored the fact that there are today 6,800 different dialects or languages on the planet that might qualify for political recognition as independent ethnic groups – obviously far too many to accommodate. Rosecrance and Stein went on to offer four reasons why the one-nation, one-state principle was unlikely in any event to prevail. First, they said, governments are more responsive nowadays to their ethnic minority communities than were their imperial predecessors, and they also have more resources at their disposal. Secondly, separate sovereignty cannot be achieved today without external recognition and support. Independence cannot be won without military assistance and economic aid from abroad; and international recognition, in turn, will not be forthcoming if the aspiring nationalist movement engages in international terrorism to gain attention. Thirdly, while globalization may initially have stimulated ethnic discontent by creating inequality, it has proved able to generate wealth sufficient to quiet future ethnic discontents within the existing state political system. 'Distributed economic growth', they said, 'is a palliative for political discontent.' And lastly, a discontented ethnic group has more than one way to react to ethnic discrimination. '[W]hatever its concerns, it does not always have to seek independence to alleviate them. It has another safety valve: emigration to another country.'

Rosecrance and Stein conclude their commentary on Muller with a flat endorsement of large-scale states, of bigness as a valued commodity in the current international marketplace. '[S]ecessionists', they say, 'will generally be better off remaining inside existing states, if only because

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the international system now advantages larger agglomerations of power. Economies of industrial scale are promoting economies of political size . . . Only larger political entities can keep production, research and development, and innovation within a single economic zone. Big is back.'

Globalization versus ethnic group identity

The debate over the endurance of ethnic nationalism, as we have seen, almost inevitably brings up the subject of globalization. Rosecrance and Stein, we observed, described it as a 'palliative for political discontent' and a reinforcement of the existing state system. That interpretation forecasts the obsolescence and eventual passing of the separatist project, alongside, of course, the triumph of globalization.

If only things were that simple! A vast and defiantly ambiguous phenomenon, globalization has been defined in many and not infrequently contradictory ways. Perhaps its plainest formulation is that of Harvard University's Joseph Nye, who wrote of globalization as 'worldwide networks of interdependence'.[7] A more complex formulation is that of *New York Times* correspondent Thomas Friedman, who wrote of it as 'the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before . . . [and involving] the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world'.[8] While Nye's formulation defines globalization in neutral terms simply as a process of change that is shrinking the world, Friedman's casts globalization in a decidedly favourable light. It represents, for him, a radically new international system driven by free-market capitalism and the scientific and technological advances it has promoted. These mighty engines of change have for the most part, according to Friedman, empowered and enabled individuals, freeing them from the constraints and fetters of their parochial and traditional pasts and opening up for them new vistas and opportunities for human advancement. Clearly, then, for Friedman individuals, not groups, are the dynamic element in globalization.

This theme of individual empowerment is developed most fully in Friedman's recent book, *The World is Flat: a Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. In it, Friedman proposes that globalization has evolved progressively in three stages – the third and last, which he calls 'Globalization 3.0' and dates from the year 2000, is distinguished by its empowerment of individuals.[9] He argued metaphorically 'that the world has gone from round to flat', meaning by that that 'everywhere you turn, hierarchies are being challenged from below or transforming themselves from top-down structures into more horizontal and collaborative ones'.[10] To the present writer's knowledge, Friedman has never written at any great length on ethnic nationalism or separatism, but the position he has staked out for himself

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on the subject of globalization would appear to rule out much sympathy for the hardening of ethnic group identity which ethnic nationalism both requires and romanticizes. He is clearly not an advocate of hardcore multi-culturalism, even less of the breakup of nations. In a globalizing world, he has been quoted as saying, 'if you're reaching for a wall, it's a losing strategy because the technology is going to blow that wall down'.[11]

Friedman's interpretation of globalization is vulnerable on at least two counts. One, given unusually articulate and animated voice by Gabor Steingart, senior correspondent of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, is that the flat-earth mentality Friedman espouses in fact enshrines an extraordinarily naïve vision of the global transformation now in progress. Far from seeing globalization as a largely empowering and enabling process, Steingart holds that it 'is a process that polarizes and divides, producing winners and losers alike – both in large numbers'.[12] The economic out-sourcing that Friedman extols as a worker-empowering and liberating force in India and elsewhere, Steingart deplors as just one of many signs of the inexorably eviscerating economic circumstances of the Western working class. 'The flat world is broken', he declares, 'at least for workers.'[13] In sharp contrast with Friedman, Steingart's vision of the future is dark and forbid-ding. 'Today's globalization of our economies', he observed, 'is also not a work of peace . . . The world's economic interdependence is primarily an opportunity to increase power and wealth . . . Trade is no guarantee of peace among states, nor does globalization establish some pacifistic international order . . . [T]hese surging flows of goods and wealth are making the world more dangerous, not more peaceful.'[14] Steingart's sketch of the coming global geopolitical environment is thus not one to encourage belief in global-ization's capacity to quiet future discontents, whatever their origin.

A second way in which Friedman's interpretation of globalization is vul-nerable stems directly from globalization's potential impact on interethnic relations. Voicing a view of globalization that echoes Steingart's deeply pessimistic view of its pacifying tendencies, Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor, argued in *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* that the combined spread of political democracy and the free-market economy is almost invariably explosive in countries with what she calls 'market-dominant minorities'.[15] She pointed in particular to the impact free-market democracy has had in some South East Asian countries, where ethnic Chinese minorities (Overseas Chinese) often possess much greater wealth than indigenous majorities. Almost invariably, the impoverished but politically 'empowered' ethnic majorities strike back, sometimes violently, against the disproportionately rich minorities, polar-izing societies and making a mockery of Friedman's vaunted 'spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world'.

Chua's argument, pertaining for the most part to relatively small, rich, and largely urban-based minorities, leaves essentially untouched the question of

globalization's impact on ethnic *separatism*, this book's focus. Clearly, that question cannot be answered without due attention to a number of factors, not the least being globalization's impact on governmental capacity and performance, in particular as these affect the lives and well-being of potentially separatist ethnic minorities. Consideration of this aspect of globalization, in turn, has to take into account what many understand to be the most momentous development of the present era – Asia's astonishing ascent in the hierarchy of global power. Naturally, this development looms very large in more than a few of this book's chapters.

Asia's rise and ethnic nationalism: what lies ahead?

This book contains ten case studies focusing on eight different Asian countries. Two of these countries, China and India, are leading actors in the drama of Asia's rise in global power. Inevitably, the rise of these two states impacts on the fates of all the other states of Asia. It also impacts, and in many instances heavily, on the fates of separatist-minded ethnic minorities, not only on those within China and India but also on many located elsewhere in Asia. When it comes to the kind of impact envisioned, attention has to be paid to both internal and external dimensions. By internal is meant a government's will and capacity to manage, or mismanage, the demands of the country's own ethnic minorities. By external is meant the extent and objectives of a government's intervention, openly or covertly, in the ethnic affairs of neighbouring or more distant states. After all, ethnic separatism has a huge interstate and strategic dimension – a geopolitical dimension in other words. This dimension will be dealt with in its own right in the final chapter of this book.

There exists a huge literature on Asia's rise. Inevitably, this literature exhibits a great diversity of viewpoints, some of them emphasizing positive, others negative consequences of what all agree is a momentous change afoot. Is a risen Asia – a politically more powerful, economically richer, and militarily better armed Asia, in other words – going to deal fairly and accommodatingly with its many ethnic minorities, or is it more likely to settle for tried and trusted methods of brutality and repression? Can disgruntled ethnic minorities look forward to increased government willingness to cater to their desires for greater self-determination and autonomy? Or is the past, so often hostile to such aspirations, still likely to be prologue to the future? '[W]orld peace', insists the former Singaporean diplomat and author Kishore Mahbubani, 'is not a pipe dream.' Asians, he claims, have absorbed and are now implementing the 'culture of peace that has affected relations among the Western states since the end of World War II'.[16] The world as a whole will become more peaceful and stable, he says. 'The rise of Asia will be good for the world.'[17] Will it also, this book inquires, be good for ethnic minorities?

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Outline of the book

Each of the eleven chapters that follow approaches the problem of ethnic separatism somewhat differently, some accenting geopolitical factors, others public policy (both domestic and foreign), others remedial aspects, and others the complexities of ethnic identity. Cumulatively, they provide a comprehensive portrait of ethnic separatism's current challenge to the states of Asia and of state responses to this challenge.

Chapters 2 through 4 focus on the separatist problem in three countries in South East Asia – Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar/Burma. Chapters 5 through 8 focus on three countries of South Asia – Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. In Chapter 7, two of these countries, India and Pakistan, are considered together in relation to the Kashmir separatist problem that has bedevilled their bilateral relationship for many decades. Chapters 9 and 10 focus on East Asia, specifically on separatist challenges in China's sprawling western territories. Chapter 9 deals with Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang, a problem whose political impact on China has acquired surprisingly greater importance in the past year. Chapter 10, in turn, deals with Tibetan separatism, a problem with perennial importance in China–India relations. Chapter 11 turns to the Pacific Islands and the separatist issues that have arisen in Papua New Guinea. Finally, Chapter 12 concludes the book with a broad assessment of the immensely important linkage that exists between the multiple challenges of ethnic separatism in Asia and the rapidly evolving geopolitical circumstances of the Asian continent.

Finally, a word is needed about the definition of ethnic separatism, a vital concept used throughout this book. The terms 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity', understood in their broadest sense, refer to a comprehensive assortment of group cultural identities rooted in language, race, nationality, religion, tribe, and so on. When linked to separatism, the concepts imply the existence of a more or less organized and identity-based movement whose actions may range from the mildest forms of social protest all the way up to the most extreme forms of secessionist violence, and whose objectives range just as broadly from a modest level of cultural autonomy to complete territorial independence. The contributors to this volume focus for the most part on Asia's better organized, radically motivated, and chronically violent separatist movements; but since their authorial mandate embraced an assessment of separatism's likely future trajectory in the case studies examined, they were bound to keep in view the possibility of fundamentally changed circumstances, whether in the goals and strategies of the separatist movements or in governmental reactions to them. This book's adopted goal was to take a measure of ethnic separatism's prospects in Asia – of the scale of its current challenge to Asian governments, of the character of state responses to it, and of the likely success of remedial plans. The book as a whole takes sides with neither governments nor separatists. However, it is undoubtedly correct to

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say that all of the contributors to this book would prefer that states meet the separatist challenge in a manner fair to all sides and as non-violently as possible.

Notes

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8. T. L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 8–9.
9. T. L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: a Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005).
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11. E. Pearlman, 'The New York Times's Thomas Friedman on Globalization', *CIO Insight: Expert Voices*, 25 March 2005, http://www.cioinsight.com/c/a/Expert-Voices/The-New-York-Timess-Thomas-Friedman-on, accessed 9 June 2009.
12. G. Steingart, *The War for Wealth: the True Story of Globalization, or Why the Flat World Is Broken* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), p. 142.
13. Ibid., p. 131.
14. Ibid., pp. 205–6.
15. A. Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).
16. K. Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), pp. 21, 79.
17. Ibid., p. 1.

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Following the postponement of CPhI South East Asia in February, COVID-19 continues to affect health, travel and business worldwide. Because of this, the organiser has taken the difficult yet necessary decision to further postpone the event. The show will now take place from 4-6 November 2020 in Hall 11-12, Impact, Muang Thong, Thani.Â Iâ€™ve met some people from Australia and saw people from other parts of the world coming to CPhI to expand their business in ASEAN.â€ Prabo Wijetunge, PhD. Executive Director (USA), CMC. South-East Asiaâ€™s travel and tourism industry has incredible potential to help generate growth, create jobs and enable regional development. But which countries are best positioned to benefit most from the industry?Â We use cookies to improve your experience on our website. By using our website you consent to all cookies in accordance with our updated Cookie Notice. I accept. Agenda. Platforms.